

# I Cannot Make This Story Come Out Right

Kevin Coates

I cannot make this story come out right. I walked in and he was dead. Dead is dead. Nothing I said or did at that moment could change a single thing. I could wish it; I could regret it. But I could not change it. He was dead on the floor, looking like he was uncomfortably asleep, stiff. He did not have on his favorite shirt. There was a small spaghetti stain under his left pocket, and I knew he probably hadn't even seen it. How distressed he would have been to die with a spaghetti stain on his shirt.

He must have fallen gracefully. No chair was on its side, no rug corner uneven. I knew I had to look at the back of his head. That might be where he took the brunt of the fall. Should I call 911 first or look first? Could I be faulted for either choice? If I rolled him over to look at his head, would I be guilty of tampering with evidence – and was he evidence? I was looking at my dead husband and thinking of him as evidence. I should be shot just for that.

I cannot make this story come out right. I walked in and he was dead. Dead is dead. Nothing I said or did at that moment could change a single thing – I could wish it undone, I could regret it. But there was nothing I could change. He was on the floor, on his back, one arm extended like he was welcoming me. Something red was on his shirt: maybe blood or tomato. I had the predictable urge to get a Clorox wipe and remove it before anyone else saw him, but I knew that might be looked upon badly. People might say: did you hear that his wife was worried about the laundry, that she cleaned up his shirt before she even called 911? I left the stain.

His head was turned just a little to the side, toward the door, as if he'd been watching for me. His eyes were open. Still blue. He was staring away from a room where nothing was out of place. All of the furniture was just as it had been this afternoon: the rug straight and the chairs at the correct angle in front of the fireplace, two wine glasses on the table. There was no broken glass.

I wanted to leave him there, just like he was. I wanted to not think about it. I was worried that when I called 911 my voice would not be shaking. I was embarrassed by my lack of despair. Some people can cry on demand – a useful skill – but I could never do that. It's hard to cry when you're angry, when you want to kick the body in front of you, dead or not.

I cannot make this story come out right. He was dead when I walked back in. Dead is dead. It's not as if anything I said or did at that moment could change a single thing. I could wish it hadn't happened, and I could even regret it. But I could not change it. His shirt was unbuttoned

from the third button on down, untucked from his pants. There was some sort of stain, like tomato sauce, right below his pocket. He would not have been able to see it, but he'd be mortified that he died with a sloppy shirt. That made me smile.

His buckle was undone and his pants were unzipped. Unzipped and open. For his sake I knew I should zip them up, but wouldn't that be tampering with evidence? Once your husband is dead, flat on the floor, he becomes more evidence than responsibility. It wasn't so much that I wanted him to be humiliated, but that it wasn't my problem. I should call 911 without touching him; that was the right thing to do. I thought it was the right thing to do – I wasn't sure how the rest of the world would judge. I stared hard at his face, his open blue eyes, his chipped front tooth, his not-at-all receding hairline, his tomato sauce stain. Perhaps it was his appetite that killed him. It certainly wasn't me, no matter how often I'd thought about life without him. I had never fantasized his death.

I cannot make this story come out right. When I walked back in, he was dead. Dead is dead. Nothing I could say or do at that moment would change a single thing. I could wish it undone; I could regret it had happened. But I could not change it. I wasn't sure I wanted it changed. He was on the floor looking like he'd just fallen asleep, his shirt undone, his buckle undone, his pants unzipped, his cock stiff. That wasn't my fault – I had not been here for hours, and when I left, his pants were zipped. I didn't know if he'd been alone – such a distressing thought, dying alone – or if someone had been here. Was someone's DNA mixed with mine in the hairs in the bed or in the lipstick on this afternoon's wine glasses? Maybe there was more evidence here other than my dead husband. It looked like such a stupid way to die: tomato sauce on his shirt, hand on his cock. He had not died for any greater good. He had not tried to spare my feelings, even in death. Selfish, selfish man. There was no use in even yelling at him now. He denied me even that.

I cannot make this story come out right. When I walked in after being gone all afternoon, he was dead. Dead is dead. Nothing I said or did at that moment could change it. I might have wished it; I might later regret it. But I could not change it. His arm was out, reaching for me, but his other hand was on his cock, stiff, not thinking of me at all. He died with his eyes open. He had on the same shirt from lunch with the same marinara stain right under the pocket. I had seen it across the table, but I hadn't mentioned it. I could be forgiven for that, couldn't I? He had just told me he wanted me to leave. It's not you, he said, predictable. I watched him walk out of the room ahead of me with a stained shirt.

I packed quickly, inefficiently. I didn't think about packing anything necessary like a toothbrush or shampoo. I could buy all of that with his credit card; I would buy all new

underwear and hand towels and cereal bowls. I would buy a flat screen TV and a small cobalt blue bud vase and mason jars and silver tea spoons. I packed my favorite jeans and, when he wasn't looking, I packed his favorite shirt. You can't pack eighteen years of life in a half hour. I said I needed more time. "We all need more time," he said.

He didn't get any. Here he was, salty stiff cock resting on his khakis for the EMTs to see. I could have zipped his pants if I wanted to protect him. I had called 911 but I hadn't checked the back of his head. The paramedics found a lump and dried blood there. Evidence, they said. They asked if I had been with him when it happened.

I did not tell them that my suitcase was in the car. I did not tell them that he had said he wanted me to go, or that I had wept all day at the Starbucks on the corner because I did not know how to live without him. Now I had no choice. I had come back angry and ready for the fight I deserved. I didn't get it. I do not know how to make this story come out right.

**Kevin Coates** is a recent graduate of the Masters in Humanities program with an emphasis in Creative Writing. This piece is one of the completing pieces she is working on to turn her creative writing masters project, *Twelve Rules for Drinking*, into a full length collection of short stories. She lives here in San Rafael and has been joyously taking advantage of the opportunity to audit classes that Dominican graduates receive.